



Transgression or Affirmation?

By Jason Rodgers



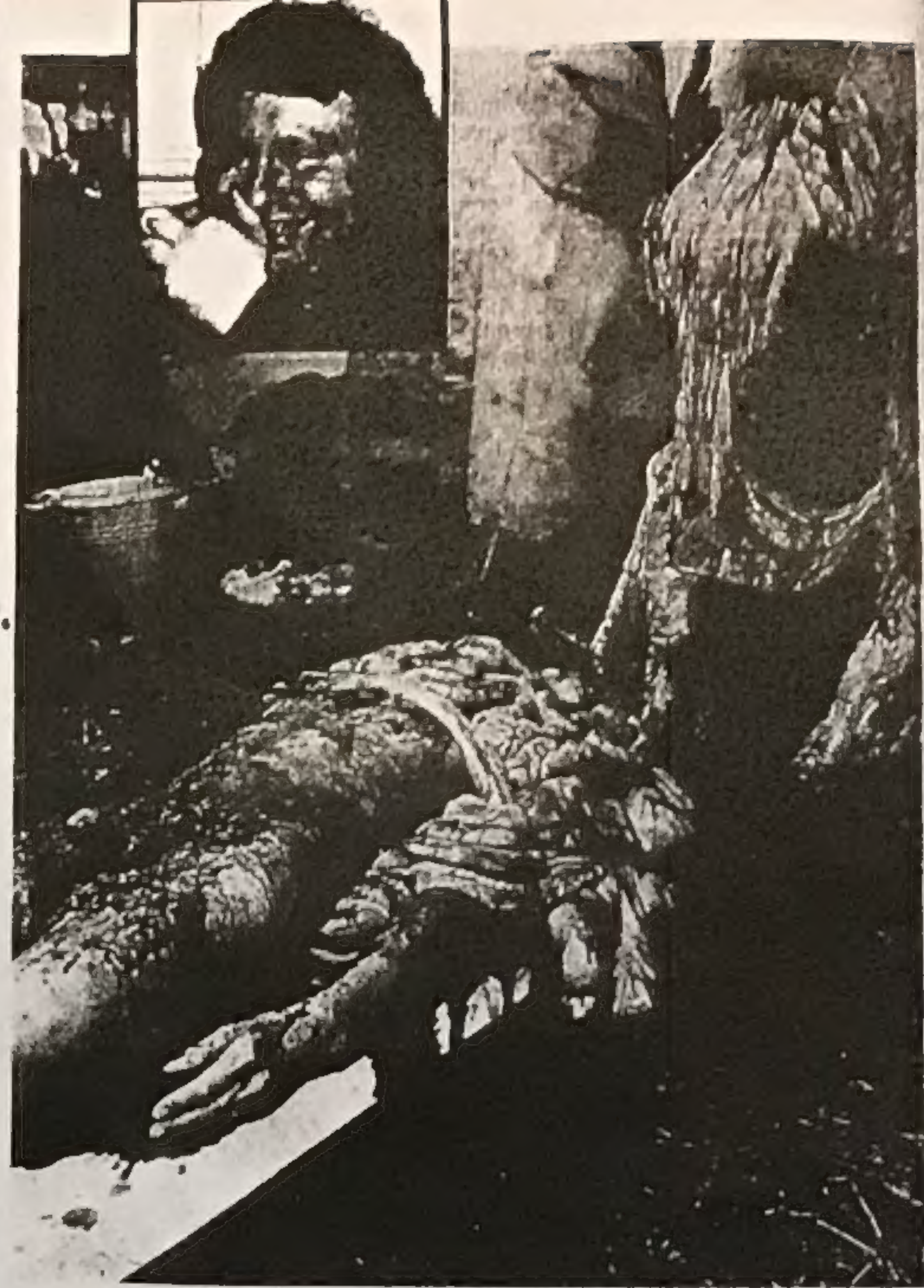
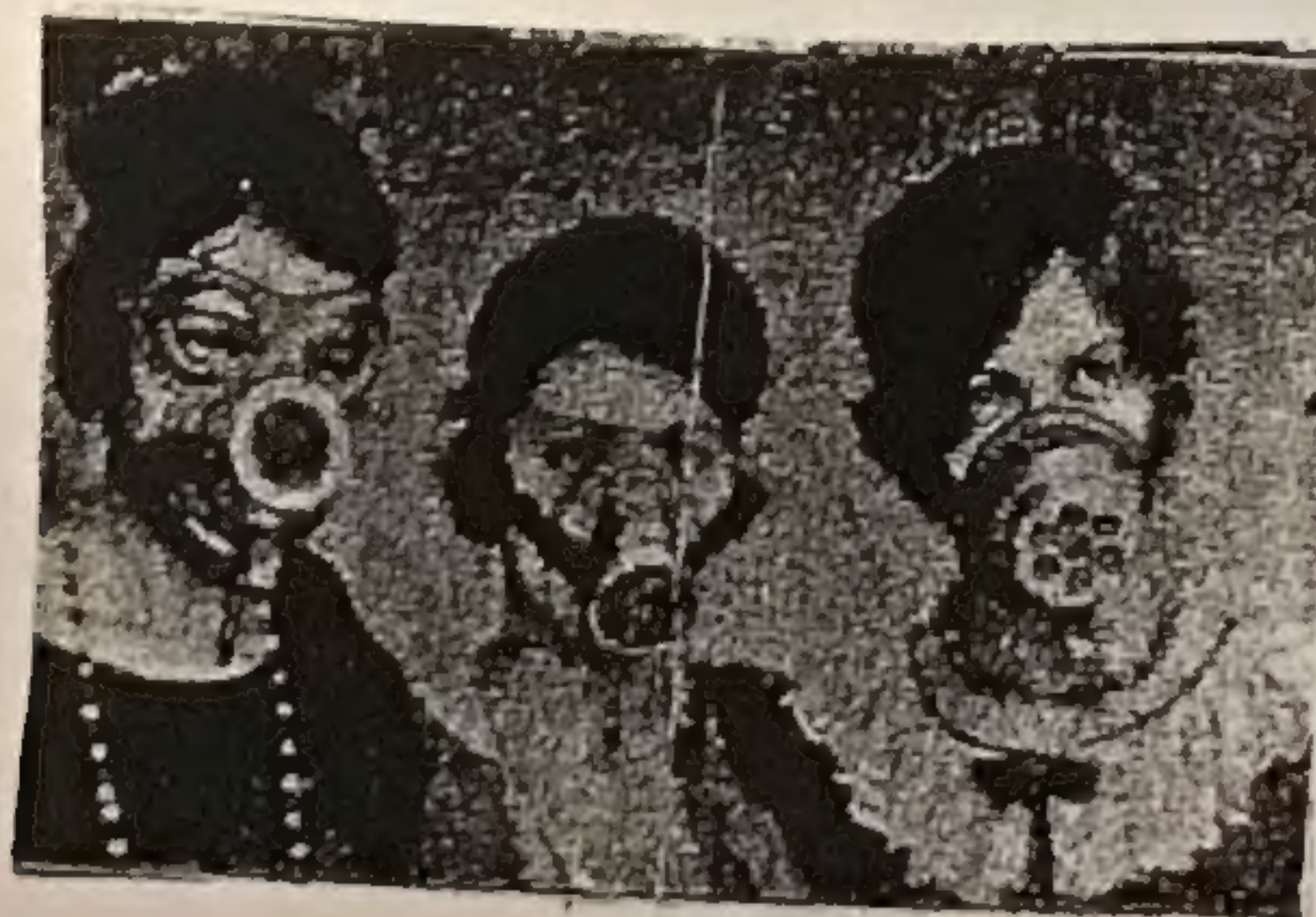
"Industrial music first flirted with fascism as an attempt to shock. And to disarm signifiers by borrowing knee-jerk paraphernalia from all sectors (like brown shirts of the Nazis along with flesh-elongating earrings from Africa), and mashing them together in their apparel and music and album cover art and stage show... The problem is, the right wing just looks so good with their crisp uniforms and threatening symbols, and the left, with their yielding symbols and disorganized apparel, have never even come close to competing, aesthetically"

-Lisa Crystal Carver (80)

All art must be transgressive in some way, if it is to be meaningful, if it is to cause change. It must confront belief and taboo, in some way, and challenge them. The danger is that transgressive art can fall into a feedback cycle and rather than exorcize the spooks of society, merely amplify them. The shit of society and humanity needs to be viewed and confronted. But what happens when it is contemplated as a terrible substitution for navel gazing or worse, elevated to the status of high art, of high beauty?

On the most basic level art uses taboo to explore and examine the contentious aspects of social life. This is commonly called a cultural forum. A cultural forum is an area in which the component parts of culture can be dissected and examined. Newcomb and Hirsch articulated the perspective that a cultural forum provided "a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and attitudes are adjusted, how meaning shifts" (Newcomb and Hirsch 11). It also "is the realm in which we allow our monsters to come out and play, our dreams to be wrought into pictures, our fantasies transformed into plot structures" (Newcomb and Hirsch 13). Though this concept provides some insight, I've always found it lacking in some way. The cultural forum treats art and media as if they are some Hegalian component to the smooth functioning of the cybernetic social machine. They very well might be. Is this evidence against art? The cultural forum perspective is ultimately rather conservative, serving as a means of working out contradictions in society. A more radical use of art might be as psychodrama, where the shadow is confronted.

Performance art often makes this use of taboo



50 Aktion (1975) by Hermann Nitsch (Inset)

explicit. This was the basis of one early, influential performance art movement: the Wiener Aktionismus group. The group was founded by 1965 by Hermann Nitsch, as an offshoot of his Dionysian OM Theater. These performers created spectacles composed of copious amounts of blood and gore (much like many horror films). Taboos were regularly violated during the public performances. The performers masturbated in raw meat, sodomized each other, and ate shit. The goal of the performance was to shock the audience. The Aktionists, however, were very explicit in that they were attempting to shock the audience into examining their own taboos. This was intended as a ritualistic ordeal to change and shift conditioned thought. Thomas McEvelley described this as finding "striking homologies in shamanic activities" (McEvelley 73). Chris Burden, another important performance artist, did such pieces as shooting himself in the arm and crucifying himself to a Volkswagen. (McEvelley 65). These artists stood as figures in defiance of traditional concepts of morality, rationality and aesthetic beauty.

Horror film is the low culture equivalent of performance art. Both horror film and performance art challenge audiences to explore social norms and taboos, as well as transgress rational thought. Performance art does this blatantly, while horror film places the transgression within the confines of a narrative. The horror genre places a number of irrational elements within the confines of the

rational narrative. Outside invading elements invade the confines of a rational and normal space. Or, inversely, individuals representative of normal society and rationality find themselves propelled into horrific irrational environments. These elements provide conflict with, and potentially transgression of, the dominant reality.

For example, the slasher film presents an archetype for suburban violation. The irrational and transgressive figure of the slasher invades safe suburban neighborhoods and threatens to tear apart the consensus reality of the suburbanite. The film "Halloween" in many ways began this sub-genre, presenting many key elements for future films. The killer, Michael Myers, is an unstoppable force, who seemingly can not be killed. Like the zombie and vampire, he appears to neither be living, nor dead. He preys upon middle class teenagers, a group imagined to be safe. He invades the safety of the suburban home. The tendency to murder his victims while they are in the act of sex further connects sensuality and violence, two forces which taboo might function to repress and sublimate. Future slasher films often further amplified this figure and often emphasized sadistic sexuality.

The killer is not the only figure of transgression in the horror genre. The final girls in the "Nightmare on Elm Street" series also do not conform to gender stereotypes.



The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)

Instead of being passive they "voluntarily" initiate "battle by entering the domain of the monster" (Trencansky 65). This could be considered as similar to the shamanic ordeal or the dark night of the soul. If we consider the monster as a repressed aspect of the self, this could be considered as a confrontation with one's shadow. The slasher film invades areas which are traditionally considered safe, such as middle class suburbs, summer camp, and sleep. These areas are used to transgress and assault the sensibility of often middle class audiences.

The value of horror film can be a bit elusive. It seems that in all cases successful horror films transgress some sort of social taboo, functioning as a cultural forum. At times it could be that these films, as Bataille argued about de Sade, contribute "to man's slow-growing awareness of himself" (Bataille 183), by revealing the forbidden and hidden in the unconscious. This is the best case.

A horror film may be a transgression in favor of the break down of consensus and a return of the irrational Other. Conversely, it may favor a destruction or confinement of this irrational Other figure, and by extension other marginalized Others, by the forces of traditional order. This schlock can present the conflict of our times, knowingly or unknowingly. We are forced to pay some attention to popular culture. It may as well be the garbage dump of culture. Just like garbagology (the technique of gathering information on a person by ransacking their garbage cans), secrets will be revealed if given the chance.

Transgression is not necessarily a good thing. The figure of the slasher is nothing to emulate. The transgressive performance art becomes banal after repetition. At times transgression may not even dispel taboo. Though seemingly opposed, George Bataille argued that the taboo and transgression are intrinsically related, that "there exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed" (Bataille 63). The imposition of taboo in some way seems to compel its transgression. This becomes an amplification of the miserablism that characterizes society. Sometimes taboo is transgressed in order to reaffirm the taboo. This is directly in opposition to the positive project of transgression, to decondition oneself.

Or maybe it isn't. Maybe sometimes deconditioning can find itself in service of conditioning and socialization. Think of the encounter group or programs like EST. The individual is taken away for a period of time, maybe a weekend, and has their belief system broken down. When they return from this encounter group, what happens? Sometimes they take on society's conditioning all that much more. That's why corporations send their employees there. After Jerry Rubbin attended an EST training, he dropped revolution and took up business.

When a power electronics/industrial noise group uses extremist, totalitarian imagery and then refuses to make any judgment they are adopting the same postmodern stance found

in mass society. Granted, truly sophisticated and complex art can use this sort of tactic without explicit interpretation because the way the icons are repositioned speaks for itself, but this level is rarely reached.

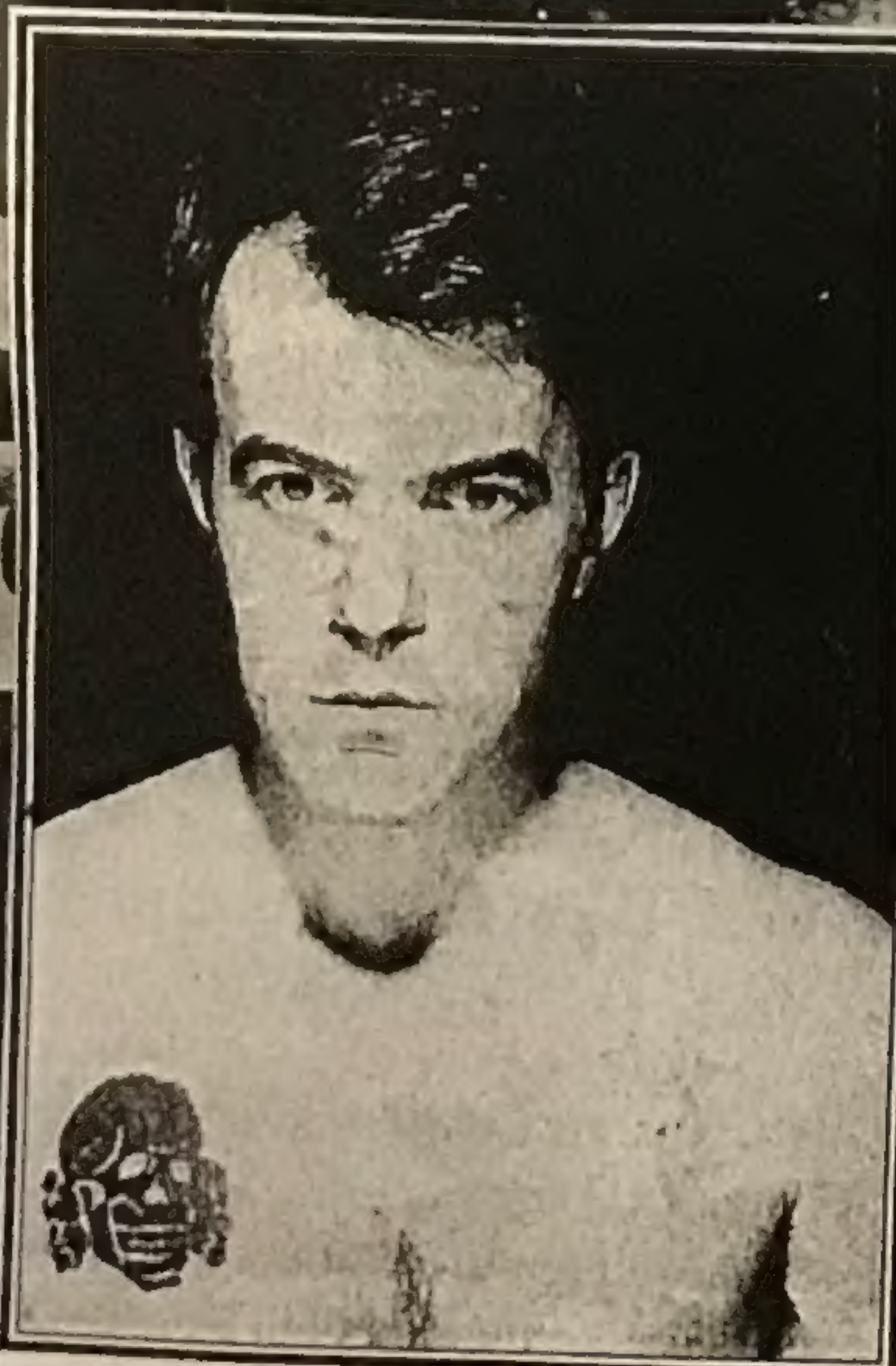
In Hakim Bey's critique of 1980s transgressive performance art, he argued that "we live in a society which advertise its costliest commodities with images of death & mutilation... It takes no guts at all to be an Art Sadist, for salacious death lies at the aesthetic center of our Consensus Paradigm" (Bey 38). Far too often the attempt to shock is a conformist tactic, because that material is just not shocking, it is the same thing you see in a tabloid. Still resorting to creating works of aesthetic beauty is not better, merely more trance. Instead new attempts to transgress are necessary, not just rehashes of old shocks. Actual confrontation is necessary.

Commenting on the links between satanism and Nazism, the late Church of Satan founder Anton LaVey argued that Nazism was sometimes appealing to Satanists due to aesthetics, not politics. He stated "The aesthetic appeal lies in the dramatic fashion of the Nazi militaria. The Nazis understood the meaning of visuals and sounds and how to use them- take their use of a lot of black leather in their uniforms and 'oompah' music in their marches, for example. There were some pretty smart guys involved in the Nazi movement- they knew how basic material could reach the soul" (Baddeley 76). Where LaVey thought this solved the issue, it may problematize it even more. In his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin described the way industrial society was linked to

fascism via aesthetics. "Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (Benjamin 242). (Benjamin was a Marxist, but a bad one, because he was always anti-authoritarian. His work exists within the contradictions of Marxism, which is why it is still valuable).

Much of the time transgression functions as a means of reasserting the core values of the totality, while destroying the few ideals and boundaries protecting one from total colonization. The Church of Satan provides a valuable example of how this sometimes functions. A playful diabolic use of evil can be liberating. Church of Satan is the opposite of this, seemingly being a rather authoritarian structure. Just as Satanism is derived from Christianity, the satanic notion of individuality is derived from collectivism. This is the opposite of individualism. LaVey can only imagine the individual as self aggrandizement, based on the oppression of others. With this the individual is reliant on the collective, not autonomous.

Where this form of transgression is based on a reactionary notion (like totalitarian terrorism), it may be possible that other forms of transgression could be life affirming and a weapon in asymmetrical warfare against the morality and reality of the totality. Art movements like Dada attempted to use shock in order to attack civilization. Movements such as punk, industrial, and power electronics continued this tactic. But now it sometimes seems that everything has been done, nothing is shocking anymore. Maybe it is time to move on from this tactic. A merely negative usage of transgression may become passive nihilism. What is needed is a positive use of transgression that could be active nihilism. Power electronics positions itself as a genre based on information warfare. In asymmetrical combat, tactics must always be shifting. What is needed is a new form of transgression.



Satanic Magister Boyd Rice, with Totenkopf (death's head) tattoo.



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